'viewpoint'—by julian bond

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# King movement lacks motivator, motion

The April 4 anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s death passed unnoticed.

King was 39 years old in 1968 when James Earl Ray murdered him as he stood on the upstairs balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

Since that day his motel room has become a shrine. His widow has tried to preserve his life's works and teachings in an Atlanta memorial.

And the American black community feels leaderless and without direction.

Single, charismatic leadership is attractive for the followers. For them, hopes and dreams can be bound in one figure. If they grant him their loyalty, they can absolve themselves of responsibility for guiding their futures.

They are required only to act, not to plan.

For the leader, it is dangerous. He must bear responsibility for their lives, while their enemies aim exclusively at him.

The months before King's murder saw his status and reputation threatened by direct order of the paranoid and bigoted FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

On Hoover's order, FBI agents set out to destroy the public image of King as a peace-loving family man devoted to democratic change. Through sexual innuendo, deliberate news leaks, illegal surveillance and selective investigations, the FBI sought to portray King as a libertine leftist, a high-rolling exploiter, a threat to national security.

History must wait for Ray to discard his fabrications to discover whether Hoover's purge helped to pull the trigger. Once done, the act made helpless widows of us all.

King's early years as a civil rights activist, from Montgomery in 1957 through Birmingham in 1965, were spent dismantling the American apartheid once so common in the South.

The technique was always the same. It started with an invitation from a local group. Southern Christian Leadership Conference organizers were introduced into the student population. Religious and labor leaders were imported to demonstrate national support.

There were planned confrontations between non-violent demonstrators, violent police and assorted rag-tag rebs. The local jail population swelled. Commerce was disrupted.

Faster than you could hum two choruses of "We Shall Overcome," the city's merchants and bankers bellied up to the bargaining table. Peace was soon at hand.

In 1966, however, King altered his arena. Instead of sleepy Southern towns where pot-bellied sheriffs provided instant villains, he moved into the urban North and city politics at its most rigid — Chicago.

The late Richard Daley was too devious for King. Daley's iron control of Chicago's Southside ghetto flouted the techniques and rhetoric that had worked so well in the machine-free South.

By 1968, King's focus had changed. The lunch counters of the urban South were integrated, but the fancy restaurants remained out of the reach of most blacks.

Front seats on buses seemed useless to a people whose longest trip was likely to be from the feudal system of the rural South to the industrial, high-rise poverty of the North.

King began to aim at economic inadequacy and in Memphis joined striking garbage men, the urban underclass passed over by the '60s movement.

When James Earl Ray shot him down, Martin Luther King was marching toward economic democracy, the necessary next step in his movement for the "beloved community."

Eleven years later the gaps in income, life expectancy and infant mortality rates between blacks and whites are growing greater. Apathy is endemic to black America. Black voting strength has declined, as has dissent. There is a moral vacuum in our leadership.

Our strengths expired in Memphis 11 years ago. His movement has no motivator, and no motion.

Ray slew the dreamer, and with him, the dream.

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